A short history: The neocon 'Clean Break' grand design and the 'regime change' disasters it has fostered

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From top left: Albert Wohlstetter, Oded Yinon, Richard Perle, William Kristol, Robert Kagan, David Wurmser, Paul Wolfowitz, Joseph Lieberman, William Safire, Eliot Cohen, David Frum, Norman Podhoretz, Kenneth Adelman, Charles Krauthammer, Benjamin Netanyahu, Phili Zelikow, Elliott Abrams, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Douglas Feith and Bernard Lewis.

To understand today's crises in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and elsewhere, one must grasp their shared Lebanese connection. This assertion may seem odd. After all, what is the big deal about Lebanon? That little country hasn't had top headlines since Israel deigned to bomb and invade it in 2006. **Yet, to a large extent, the roots of the bloody tangle now enmeshing the Middle East lie in Lebanon: or to be more precise, in the Lebanon policy of Israel.**

Rewind to the era before the War on Terror. In 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's "dovish" Prime Minister, was assassinated by a right-wing zealot. This precipitated an early election in which Rabin's Labor Party was defeated by the ultra-hawkish Likud, lifting hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu to his first Premiership in 1996.

That year, an elite study group produced a policy document for the incipient administration titled, "*A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*." The membership of the Clean Break study group is highly significant, as it included American neoconservatives who would later hold high offices in the Bush Administration and play driving roles in its Middle East policy.

"*A Clean Break*" advised that the new Likud administration adopt a "shake it off" attitude toward the policy of the old Labor administration which, as the authors claimed, assumed national "exhaustion" and allowed national "retreat." This was the "clean break" from the past that "A Clean Break" envisioned. Regarding Israel's international policy, this meant:

> "...a clean break from the slogan, 'comprehensive peace' to a traditional concept of strategy based on balance of power."

Pursuit of *comprehensive* peace with *all* of Israel's neighbors was to be abandoned for *selective* peace with *some* neighbors (namely Jordan and Turkey) and implacable antagonism toward others (namely Iraq, Syria, and Iran). The weight of its strategic allies would tip the balance of power in favor of Israel, which could then use that leverage to topple the regimes of its strategic adversaries by using covertly managed "proxy forces" and "the

principle of preemption." Through such a "redrawing of the map of the Middle East," Israel will "shape the regional environment," and thus, "Israel will not only contain its foes; it will transcend them."

"*A Clean Break*" was to Israel (and ultimately to the US) what Otto von Bismarck's "*Blood and Iron*" speech was to Germany. As he set the German Empire on a warpath that would ultimately set Europe ablaze, Bismarck said:

> "Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided—that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood."

Before setting Israel and the US on a warpath that would ultimately set the Middle East ablaze, the Clean Break authors were basically saying: Not through peace accords will the great questions of the day be decided—that was the great mistake of 1978 (at Camp David) and 1993 (at Oslo)—but by "divide and conquer" and regime change. By wars both aggressive ("preemptive") and "dirty" (covert and proxy).

"*A Clean Break*" slated Saddam Hussein's Iraq as first up for regime change. This is highly significant, especially since several members of the Clean Break study group played decisive roles in steering and deceiving the United States into invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam seven years later.

The Clean Break study group's leader, Richard Perle, led the call for Iraqi regime change beginning in the 90s from his perch at the Project for a New American Century and other neocon think tanks. And while serving as chairman of a high level Pentagon advisory committee, Perle helped coordinate the neoconservative takeover of foreign policy in the Bush administration and the final push for war in Iraq.

Another Clean Breaker, Douglas Feith, was a Perle protege and a

key player in that neocon coup. After 9/11, as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Feith created two secret Pentagon offices tasked with cherry-picking, distorting, and repackaging CIA and Pentagon intelligence to help make the case for war.

Feith's "Office of Special Plans" manipulated intelligence to promote the falsehood that Saddam had a secret weapons of mass destruction program that posed an imminent chemical, biological, and even nuclear threat. **This lie was the main justification used by the Bush administration for the Iraq War.**

Feith's "Counter Terrorism Evaluation Group" trawled through the CIA's intelligence trash to stitch together far-fetched conspiracy theories linking Saddam Hussein's Iraq with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, among other bizarre pairings. Perle put the Group into contact with Ahmed Chalabi, a dodgy anti-Saddam Iraqi exile who would spin even more yarn of this sort.

Much of the Group's grunt work was performed by David Wurmser, another Perle protege and the primary author of "*A Clean Break*." Wurmser would go on to serve as an advisor to two key Iraq War proponents in the Bush administration: John Bolton at the State Department and Vice President Dick Cheney.

The foregone conclusions generated by these Clean Breaker-led projects faced angry but ineffectual resistance from the Intelligence Community, and are now widely considered scandalously discredited. But they succeeded in helping, perhaps decisively, to overcome both bureaucratic and public resistance to the march to war.

The Iraq War that followed put the Clean Break into action by grafting it onto America. The War accomplished the Clean Break objective of regime change in Iraq, thus beginning the "redrawing of the map of the Middle East." And the attendant "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive war accomplished the Clean Break objective of "reestablishing the principle of preemption"

But why did the Netanyahu/Bush Clean Breakers want to regime change Iraq in the first place? While reference is often made to "A Clean Break" as a prologue to the Iraq War, **it is often forgotten that the document proposed regime change in Iraq primarily as a "means" of "weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria."** Overthrowing Saddam in Iraq was merely a stepping stone to "foiling" and ultimately overthrowing Bashar al-Assad in neighboring Syria. As Pat Buchanan put it:

> "In the Perle-Feith-Wurmser strategy, Israel's enemy remains Syria, but the road to Damascus runs through Baghdad."

Exactly how this was to work is baffling. As the document admitted, although both were Baathist regimes, Assad and Saddam were far more enemies than allies. "*A Clean Break*" floated a convoluted pipe dream involving a restored Hashemite monarchy in Iraq (the same US-backed, pro-Israel dynasty that rules Jordan) using its sway over an Iraqi cleric to turn his co-religionists in Syria against Assad. Instead, the neocons ended up settling for a different pipe(line) dream, sold to them by that con-man Chalabi, involving a pro-Israel, Chalabi-dominated Iraq building a pipeline from Mosul to Haifa. One only wonders why he didn't sweeten the deal by including the Brooklyn Bridge in the sale.

As incoherent as it may have been, getting at Syria through Iraq is what the neocons wanted. And this is also highly significant for us today, because the US has now fully embraced the objective of regime change in Syria, even with Barack Obama inhabiting the White House instead of George W. Bush.

Washington is pursuing that objective by partnering with Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf States in supporting the anti-Assad insurgency in Syria's bloody civil war, and thereby majorly abetting the bin Ladenites (Syrian Al Qaeda and ISIS) leading that insurgency. Obama has virtually become an honorary Clean Breaker by pursuing a Clean Break objective ("rolling back Syria") using Clean Break strategy ("balance of power" alliances with select Muslim states) and Clean Break tactics (a covert and proxy "dirty war"). Of course the neocons are the loudest voices calling for the continuance and escalation of this policy. And Israel is even directly involving itself by providing medical assistance to Syrian insurgents, including Al Qaeda fighters.

Another target identified by "*A Clean Break*" was Iran. This is highly significant, since while the neocons were still riding high in the Bush administration's saddle, they came within an inch of launching a US war on Iran over yet another manufactured and phony WMD crisis. While the Obama administration seems on the verge of finalizing a nuclear/peace deal with the Iranian government

in Tehran, the neocons and Netanyahu himself (now Prime Minister once again) have pulled out all the stops to scupper it and put the US and Iran back on a collision course.

The neocons are also championing ongoing American support for Saudi Arabia's brutal war in Yemen to restore that country's US-backed former dictator. Simply because the "Houthi" rebels that overthrew him and took the capital city of Sanaa are Shiites, they are assumed to be a proxy of the Shiite Iranians, and so this is seen by neocons and Saudi theocons alike as a war against Iranian expansion.

Baghdad is a pit stop on the road to Damascus, and Sanaa is a pit stop on the road to Tehran. But, according to the Clean Breakers, Damascus and Tehran are themselves merely pit stops on the road to Beirut.

According to "*A Clean Break*," Israel's main beef with Assad is that:

> "Syria challenges Israel on Lebanese soil."

And its great grief with the Ayatollah is that Iran, like Syria, is one of the:

> "...principal agents of aggression in Lebanon..."

All regime change roads lead to Lebanon, it would seem. So this brings us back to our original question. What *is* the big deal about Lebanon?

The answer to this question goes back to Israel's very beginnings. Its Zionist founding fathers established the bulk of Israel's territory by dispossessing and ethnically cleansing three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs in 1948. Hundreds of thousands of these were driven (sometimes literally in trucks, sometimes force marched with gunshots fired over their heads) into Lebanon, where they were gathered in miserable refugee camps.

In Lebanon the Palestinians who had fled suffered an apartheid state almost as rigid as the one Israel imposed on those who stayed behind, because the dominant Maronite Christians there were so protective of their political and economic privileges in Lebanon's confessional system.

In a 1967 war of aggression, Israel conquered the rest of formerly-British Palestine, annexing the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and placing the Palestinians there (many of whom fled there seeking refuge after their homes were taken by the Israelis in 1948) under a brutal, permanent military occupation characterized by continuing dispossession and punctuated by paroxysms of mass murder.

This compounding of their tragedy drove the Palestinians to despair and radicalization, and they subsequently lifted Yasser Arafat and his *fedayeen* (guerrilla) movement to the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), then headquartered in Jordan.

When the king of Jordan massacred and drove out the PLO, Arafat and the remaining members relocated to Lebanon. There they waged cross-border guerrilla warfare to try to drive Israel out of the occupied territories. The PLO drew heavily from the refugee camps in Lebanon for recruits.

This drew Israel deeply into Lebanese affairs. In 1976, Israel started militarily supporting the Maronite Christians, helping to fuel a sectarian civil war that had recently begun and would rage until 1990. That same year, Syrian forces entered Lebanon, partook in the war, and began a military occupation of the country.

In 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon to drive the PLO back and to recruit a proxy army called the "South Lebanon Army" (SLA).

In 1982 Israel launched a full scale war in Lebanon, fighting both Syria and the PLO. Osama bin Laden later claimed that it was seeing the wreckage of tall buildings in Beirut toppled by Israel's "total war" tactics that inspired him to destroy American

buildings like the Twin Towers.

In this war, Israel tried to install a group of Christian Fascists called the Phalange in power over Lebanon. This failed when the new Phalangist ruler was assassinated. As a reprisal, the Phalange perpetrated, with Israeli connivance, the massacre of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of Palestinian refugees and Lebanese Shiites. (See Murray Rothbard's moving contemporary coverage of the atrocity.)

Israel's 1982 war succeeded in driving the PLO out of Lebanon, although not in destroying it. And of course hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees still linger in Lebanon's camps, yearning for their right of return: a fact that cannot have escaped Israel's notice.

The Lebanese Shiites were either ambivalent or welcoming toward being rid of the PLO. But Israel rapidly squandered whatever patience the Shiites had for it by brutally occupying southern Lebanon for years. This led to the creation of Hezbollah, a Shiite militia not particularly concerned with the plight of the Sunni Palestinian refugees, but staunchly dedicated to driving Israel and its proxies (the SLA) completely out of Lebanon.

Aided by Syria and Iran, though not nearly to the extent Israel would have us believe, Hezbollah became the chief defensive force directly frustrating Israel's efforts to dominate and exploit its northern neighbor. In 1993 and again in 1996 (the year of "A Clean Break"), Israel launched still more major military operations in Lebanon, chiefly against Hezbollah, but also bombing Lebanon's general population and infrastructure, trying to use terrorism to motivate the people and the central government to crack down on Hezbollah.

This is the context of "*A Clean Break*": Israel's obsession with crushing Hezbollah and dominating Lebanon, even if it means turning most of the Middle East upside down (regime changing Syria, Iran, and Iraq) to do it.

9/11 paved the way for realizing the Clean Break, using the United States as a gigantic proxy, thanks to the Israel Lobby's massive influence in Congress and the neocons' newly won dominance in the Bush Administration.

Much to their chagrin, however, its first phase (the Iraq War) did not turn out so well for the Clean Breakers. The blundering American grunts ended up installing the most vehemently pro-Iran Shiite faction in power in Baghdad, and now Iranian troops are even stationed and fighting inside Iraq. Oops. And as it turns out, Chalabi may have been an Iranian agent all along. (But don't worry, Mr. Perle, I'm sure he'll eventually come through with that pipeline.)

This disastrous outcome has given both Israel and Saudi Arabia nightmares about an emerging "Shia Crescent" arcing from Iran through Iraq into Syria. And now the new Shiite "star" in Yemen completes this menacing "Star and Crescent" picture. The fears of the Sunni Saudis are partially based on sectarianism. But what Israel sees in this picture is a huge potential regional support network for its nemesis Hezbollah.

Israel would have none of it. In 2006, it launched its second full scale war in Lebanon, only to be driven back once again by that damned Hezbollah. It was time to start thinking big and regional again. As mentioned above, the Bush war on Iran didn't pan out. (This was largely because the CIA got its revenge on the neocons by releasing a report stating plainly that Iran was not anything close to a nuclear threat.) So instead the neocons and the Saudis drew the US into what Seymour Hersh called "the Redirection" in 2007, which involved clandestine "dirty war" support for Sunni jihadists to counter Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.

When the 2011 Arab Spring wave of popular uprisings spread to Syria, the Redirection was put into overdrive. The subsequent US-led dirty war discussed above had the added bonus of drawing Hezbollah into the bloody quagmire to try to save Assad, whose

regime now finally seems on the verge of collapse.

The Clean Break is back, baby! Assad is going, Saddam is gone, and who knows: the Ayatollah may never get his nuclear deal anyway. But most importantly for "securing the realm," Hezbollah is on the ropes.

Comment: All that has changed since Russia joined with Syria to keep Assad in power.

And so what if the Clean Break was rather messy and broke so many bodies and buildings along the way? Maybe it's like what Lenin said about omelets and eggs: you just can't make a Clean Break without breaking a few million Arabs and a few thousand Americans. And what about all those fanatics now running rampant throughout large swaths of the world thanks to the Clean Break wars, mass-executing Muslim "apostates" and Christian "infidels" and carrying out terrorist attacks on westerners? Again, the Clean Breakers must remind themselves, keep your eye on the omelet and forget the eggs.

Well, dear reader, you and I are the eggs. And if we don't want to see our world broken any further by the imperial clique of murderers in Washington for the sake of the petty regional ambitions of a tiny clique of murderers in Tel Aviv, we must insist on American politics making a clean break from the neocons, and US foreign policy making a clean break from Israel.

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